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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 000128

FOR WHA A/S SHANNON FROM AMBASSADOR LLORENS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV IR HO

SUBJECT: IRANIAN VISIT TO HONDURAS CANCELED BY PRESIDENT ZELAYA

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1B. TEGUCIGALPA 95

Classified By: AMBASSADOR HUGO LLORENS, REASONS 1.5(b and d)

(C) 1. Summary. President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya reversed a decision by his foreign minister to have Iranian officials visit Tegucigalpa for talks February 28. The minister will now meet privately with the Iranians in Mexico. Zelaya's decision followed a phone call from the Ambassador expressing USG concern. Zelaya appeared not to have been fully briefed on the nature of the meetings. We will continue to press him not to establish any type of relations with Iran. Zelaya underscored the depth of U.S.-Honduran relations in explaining his decision, referring to his recent trip to Washington and Denver as an excellent example of the closeness of the relations. End summary.

12. (C) Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya ordered his foreign minister, the evening of September 26, to cancel a planned February 28 visit to Tegucigalpa by Iranian MFA Vice Minister for the Americas Alireza Salari Sharifabad. Before Zelaya canceled the meeting, the MFA sent out a press release announcing the visit; local media therefore reported the planned meeting, but, as of this cable, not the cancellation. Zelaya's decision followed a call by the Ambassador to raise USG concerns with the planned meeting. Zelaya told the Ambassador of his decision in a second telephone call, adding that his foreign minister would now meet with the Iranians privately in Mexico.

13. (C) There had been a number of rumors in the press about possible relations after Patricia Rodas was named foreign minister on February 1. The concerns were fortified by Reftel A report on a possible meeting between Honduras and Iran to be held in early March. The Ambassador raised the issue with Zelaya the weekend of February 21 and 22, during a trip to the U.S. At that time, Zelaya said he was aware that there had been meetings in the past with Iranian business people to discuss economic issues. However, he stated that he had no/no plans to open diplomatic relations with Iran. The Ambassador explained that the establishment of diplomatic ties with Iran would be viewed very negatively in Washington. He also briefed Zelaya on Secretary Gates' statement several weeks ago expressing concerns about Iran's activities in Latin America and told him about Iran's dark past in the region, particularly their involvement in the Jewish community center and Israeli Embassy bombings in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994.

14. (C) The Ambassador received a letter from Rodas the

afternoon of February 26 announcing the February 28 meeting. The Ambassador then called Zelaya. Zelaya said he was aware of the meeting with the Iranian official, but claimed that it was strictly to discuss economic issues and reiterated that he had no plans to establish diplomatic ties to Iran. He said the Iranian official was in the region and that their government had asked for the meeting. Zelaya said that he would ask the MFA to issue a communique making clear that the nature of the visit was strictly economic and had no political connotation. The Ambassador told Zelaya that he was surprised and disappointed by the news and conveyed our strong concern that any diplomatic opening with Iran could harm our ability to work in a cooperative fashion with his government. The Ambassador suggested that the Honduran government be more publicly explicit that there was no intention to establish relations with Iran. Zelaya said the official Honduran position was not to oppose economic contact with Iran if they had something to offer, while avoiding a move to establish political and diplomatic ties.

¶5. (C) Zelaya called the Ambassador several hours later the same evening to tell him that he had ordered Rodas to cancel the meeting. He said that Rodas would instead meet privately with the Iranian officials in Mexico. Zelaya said he had taken this step to preserve the excellent relations his country had with the U.S. He referred to his recent trip to the U.S., where he met in Washington with the Secretaries of DHS, Agriculture, and Energy and then visited the National Renewable Energy Center (NREL) in Denver (we are encouraging Honduras to move forward on renewable energy). He commented on how well he had been received and added that he did not want to damage relations in any manner. Zelaya said he had been unaware of the nature of the Iranian meeting, believing that it was to have been with Iranian business people. We learned from several sources that Zelaya called a meeting of his advisors (not including Rodas) to discuss the Iranian visit after his first conversation with the Ambassador. The sources, who participated in the meeting, told us that the president had been surprised to learn of the nature of the Iranian visit. They confirmed that Rodas told the President the visit would be by low-level officials to discuss commercial issues.

¶6. (C) Comment: We will continue to press Zelaya not to seek any type of relations with Iran. The best way to do this is to maintain close contact with him. The Washington/Denver trip left Zelaya extremely enthusiastic about relations with the U.S. The visit to NREL was particularly useful as it showed him that the U.S. was moving ahead into the 21st century, in sharp contrast to his fellow ALBA members. While it is not surprising that Rodas would be interested in establishing relations with Iran, given her leftist ideology, it is surprising that she would take such a step without fully informing Zelaya. Zelaya has assured us in the past that he would keep a tight reign on her actions; we will continue to press him to do so.

LLORENS